



HIGH-LEVEL PANEL DISCUSSION:
**FREEDOM FROM PERSECUTION:
CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS MINORITIES, RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN
DANGER**

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2018, 8.00-9.30 AM

CONCEPT NOTE

BACKGROUND

The persecution of Christian and other religious minorities is an alarming and often unnoticed reality in the conflict and post-conflict areas in the Middle East. Explicit targets of violent extremist and terrorist groups, persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and whole communities are killed, forced to flee their homes, and are at risk of human trafficking. Religion is organically intertwined with ethnicity, language and culture, putting Christian minorities to the forefront of violence. Recognising that their fate in the Middle East is often overlooked by the international community, including during humanitarian response and accountability efforts, and their voices remain unheard, the event will have a special focus on their protection in the region.

The nature and extent of atrocities, as well as the long-term impact of their exodus from conflict-affected areas still remain unrecognised and underestimated. Attacks against persecuted communities have long-term devastating repercussions for the stability of the whole region. Persecution does not only threaten their lives, but also damages the collective identity and social fabric of these communities, thus putting in peril their mere existence and the future of entire cultures, and threaten the cultural diversity of the region. Purposeful destruction of cultural heritage – the embodiment of religious and cultural collective identity – illustrate well the explicit attempts of terrorist groups to erase the sheer existence of thousand-year-old traditions, deeply rooted in their homeland, natural environment and rich traditions.

Preserving the multi-ethnic, multi-confessional character of conflict-affected regions is a key pillar of restoring peace, reconciliation, long-term stability and lasting peace. Therefore, the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms, freedom of religion and belief, the free practice of religion and the preservation and restoration of cultural heritage should be at the heart of all prevention, peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. Perpetrators should be condemned and held to account, and survivors should be given all assistance required for safe and voluntary return, resettlement and re-integration. Reconstruction is key for ensuring the necessary conditions for voluntary and safe return, and thus the preservation of their traditional communities. Survivors have to regain hope for a common future: rebuilding their homes, schools, hospitals and sacred places, protecting and re-constructing their cultural heritage, providing for education for their children and youth are essential in this regard.

Religious leaders are at the forefront of protection, humanitarian and psycho-social assistance in their communities, and thus are essential and valuable partners in reconstruction and reconciliation efforts. Faith leaders also have a decisive role in facilitating the re-integration of victims into their communities, their families, and in taking a firm stance against stigma and discrimination – factors that also carry the risk of dismantling communities.

Alongside immediate assistance, the ultimate goal should be to break the cycle of violence and ensure that such atrocities never happen again. Identifying, monitoring and tackling early signs of possible atrocities, incitement to violence, radicalization or violent extremism, effective and strengthened cooperation and information-sharing among states, international organizations, civil society and grassroot organisations, religious leaders and business actors are necessary in this regard.

OBJECTIVES

The high-level panel discussion aims to identify gaps in protection and development efforts for Christian communities in the Middle East, and share policy frameworks, specific programs and initiatives tailored to protect the human rights of minorities, and ensure their freedom of religion and belief and full inclusion in society. Questions to be discussed:

- What are the UN frameworks to forecast, pre-empt and protect Christians and religious pluralism against atrocities?
- What are some of the key regional or other non-universal frameworks which may serve as potential models to be applied more broadly?
- How can we strengthen the link between freedom of religion and belief, other related human rights and conflict prevention?
- What are examples of effective policies and programs ensuring the protection of Christians and religious pluralism in conflict and post-conflict settings?

FORMAT

The discussion will start with short, 6-7-minute presentations by panelists, followed by invited speakers from the floor and an interactive discussion with participants.